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## **Narrative, Identity and Change: A case study of *Laskarina Holidays***

**Brown, A.D., Humphreys, M. & Gurney, P.M. 2005. Narrative, Identity and Change: A case study of *Laskarina Holidays*. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 18, 4: 312-326.**

**Keywords** *Narrative, organizational identity, change, hegemony.*

**Abstract** *This paper contributes to our understanding of organizational identity through an analysis of shared identity narratives at the UK-based specialist tour operator Laskarina Holidays. Predicated on a view of organizations as linguistic constructs, we argue that individual and collective identities are narrative accomplishments, and that organizations tend often to be characterised by identity multiplicity. The research contribution that this paper makes is threefold. First, it makes an argument for theorizing organizational identities as narratives, constituted within discursive regimes, and continuously changing as they are created and re-created by all participants. Second, it presents a case study featuring three distinctive but interwoven collective identity narratives, (which we label ‘utilitarian’, ‘normative’ and ‘hedonic’), and contrasts these with some ‘dissonant’ voices. We argue that change in organizations is, at least in part, constituted by alterations in peoples’ understandings, encoded in narratives, and shared in conversations. Finally, it suggests that our narratological approach to theorizing and researching organizational identities is important because it both assists us in our efforts to analyze identities as the outcomes of processes of hegemonic imposition and resistance, and permits us to read polysemy back into ethnographic research.*

## **Introduction**

This paper contributes to our understanding and theorization of organizational identities as narrative constructs through an analysis of shared identity stories at a UK-based specialist tour operator (*Laskarina Holidays*). Consonant with the linguistic ‘turn’ in the social sciences, we regard ‘organization’ as a discursive space constituted through language practices, and in particular the telling and re-telling of stories, some fully-drawn, others ‘terse’ or ‘fragmentary’ (Boje 1991; Gabriel 1999). The principal arguments we make are that organizational identities are narrative accomplishments, that organizations may be characterised by multiple identity narratives, and that these narratives variously evolve, compete, overlap, intertwine, distance and often contest each others’ hegemonic reach. Our understanding of discursive, and especially narrative practices, is now well established (Foucault 1977). The concept of hegemony has also recently attracted considerable attention from scholars interested in how organizations and societies are constituted as regimes of power (Clegg 1989; Gramsci 1971). In this paper we contend that interpretive research, focused on processes of authorship and narrative can assist our efforts to theorise organizational identities both as linguistic constructs and as power effects.

Our arguments are predicated on a brief review of the literatures on narrative, organizational identity and the institutionalization of provinces of meaning. This is followed by an account of our research design and methods which highlights our view that while this paper is an attempt to provide a rich, contextualised and polyphonic account, it is also an artful product designed to persuade a potentially sceptical audience. The case material is presented in the form of three distinct narratives that we label ‘utilitarian’, ‘normative’, and ‘hedonic’. This is followed by an integrative

section in which we consider how these narratives inter-weave, and a number of dissonant voices that question the dominant narratives we identify. Our case study is then used as the starting point to theorise organizational identities as discursive constructs with hegemonic implications. Finally, some brief conclusions are drawn.

### **Organization and Identity**

Organizations are constructed through acts of languaging located in social processes of networking, negotiation and exchange (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The term ‘organization’ is a spatial metaphor that implicates a shared discursive space in which meanings are ascribed to, and understandings produced of, actors, events, actions, and contexts. Rather than fixed sets of rules or beliefs, organizations are best regarded as ‘symbolic rallying points’ defined by sets of ‘shared, mutable communicative protocols that facilitate intersubjective understanding’ (Worthington 1996, p. 67). As linguistic constructs organizations have often been analysed as performance texts, or symbolic documents, that constitute ‘a structured life-world and its communicative reproduction’ (Taylor 1990, p. 396-397). While the organization which emerges from participants’ conversations (Ford 1999) or dialogues (Rhodes 2000) is generally sufficiently continuous and consistent to maintain and objectify ‘reality’ for local actors, understandings are often disparate and fluid rather than discursively monolithic. Organizations are pluralistic and polyphonic accomplishments in which multiple and diverse understandings and language practices occur simultaneously and sequentially (Humphreys and Brown, 2002a).

Narratives (stories), understood as accounts of value-laden symbolic actions embedded in words and incorporating sequence, time and place, are one discursive

practice by which organizations are continuously constituted. Taking as our starting point suggestions that ‘...human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures’ (Sarbin 1996, p. 8), and that people are appropriately described as *homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative – (Currie 1998, p. 2), our focus is on the constitution of organized activity through the dynamic processes of narrative development, elaboration, contest and exchange. A wealth of organizational research suggests that stories or narratives are key to understanding, for example, employee socialization, learning, collective centring, and processes of change (Humphreys and Brown 2002b). In particular, theorists have focused on the role that narratives play as ‘inscriptions of past performances and scripts and staging instructions for future performances’ (Czarniawska 1998, p. 20), and ‘the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships’ (Boje 1991, p. 106). Our argument, predicated on various assertions that organizations may be conceived as storytelling systems (Boje 1991) and analysed as narrative garbage cans (O’Connor 1997), is that the identities of organizations are constituted by continuously evolving shared narratives.

Albert and Whetten’s (1985) seminal definition of organizational identity as what is central, distinctive and enduring about an organization has engendered a broad range of identity research from functionalist, interpretive, psychodynamic and postmodern perspectives (AMR 2000; Whetten and Godfrey 1998). Empirical research has sought to link organizational identity to issues of, for instance, governance, strategy, attire, and identification. Complementarily, theorists have attempted to distinguish ‘organizational identity’ from cognate notions such as ‘image’, ‘construed external image’, ‘reputation’ and ‘culture’ (Hatch and Schultz 2002). One striking feature of

this literature is that many authors adopt a ‘container’ view of organizations in which organizational identity features as one aspect or component that can be managed or maximised in the elusive quest for sustained competitive advantage. In this paper we theorise organizations and identities from a narratological perspective to which the twin fetishisms of managerialism and essentialism are quite alien.

Individual and collective identities are authored within discursive regimes that ‘provide social actors with important symbolic resources for identity negotiation’ (Read and Bartkowski 2000, p. 398). The discourses subjectively available to individuals and groups both provide ‘positions’ or ‘spaces’ for people to occupy and the material from which they reflexively construct narratives of the self. These storied identities are ‘embedded in the historiography, traditional narratives, legends and myths with which a society constitutes itself as a temporal entity’ (Tololyan 1989, p. 100). Just as individuals tend to author multiple narratives about themselves, so they will often construct many distinct stories about the organizations in which they participate as owners, employees, customers, partners and shareholders. In organization studies, this phenomenon of identity multiplicity has been theorised in different ways. Researchers have variously argued that organizations may have many identities or just one, but ‘multifaceted’ identity. Some authors have argued that different individuals and groups interpret the ‘same’ organizational identity differently, indicating the ambiguous and inconsistent nature of ‘reality’, while others have responded by attempting to distinguish various ‘types’ and ‘facets’ of identities possessed by organizations.

Our argument is that the identities of organizations are constituted by the multiple, changing, occasionally consonant, sometimes overlapping, but often competing narratives centred on them, authored by those who participate in them. It borrows both from Cooren's (1999, p. 302) view that in organizations 'there are as many narratives as there are actors', and Harrison's (2000, p. 427) finding that in the organization she studied each participant imagined it differently depending on their 'individual value orientations, professional positionings, life experiences, and class, race, gender and age differences'. These identity narratives are not static, and nor are they ever 'completed'. They are, rather, constantly in the process of being accomplished – assembled, disassembled, refined, elaborated, and embellished – with 'whole' stories, and what Boje (2001, p. 5) refers to as story 'fragments', sometimes coming together and at other times pulling apart in a complex communicative storytelling milieu. Neither are these stories appropriately regarded as ideologically neutral. In organizations in which individuals and groups are implicated in reciprocal but asymmetric relations of power, those who are hierarchically privileged seek often to mobilize centripetal forces in an effort 'to impose their own monological and unitary perceptions of truth' (Rhodes 2000, p. 227). Their storied hegemonic impositions designed to reproduce 'the active consent of dominated groups' (Clegg 1989, p. 16) may sometimes be successful, but are just as likely to be contested, questioned and resisted by others who are similarly able to deploy discursive resources and storymaking skills for their own purposes. In complex organizations, meanings are never permanently fixed, and control over discursive space is never total.



To summarize, this paper provides an analysis of several intertwined narratives told to us by members of *Laskarina* in order to illustrate the often complex, contradictory and multi-layered nature of organizational identities. Our work both draws on and draws together research on narrative and identity in an attempt to theorise organizations as ‘domains of legitimate authority’ (Mumby and Stohl 1991, p. 315) in which language is ‘at the same time, the ground on which the struggle for power is waged, the object of strategies of domination, and the means by which the struggle is actually engaged and achieved’ (Westwood and Linstead 2001, p. 10). In particular, we aim to contribute to the reinvigoration of organization theory by exploring the analytical possibilities associated with a narrative approach to understanding and problematizing issues of identity and change.

## **Research Design**

The primary aim of this study was to author an ethnographic account of the working lives of those employed by the ‘boutique’ UK-based tour operator *Laskarina Holidays*, which specialises in vacations to the Greek islands. Our main sources of data were 39 semi-structured interviews conducted with employees between April and September 2003. Of these, 23 interviews were carried out in the UK with 19 individuals, 4 key employees being interviewed twice, and 16 interviews were conducted with ‘reps’ and ‘area managers’ in the Greek islands. Three people working on the Greek islands could not be formally interviewed, and these people were the only *Laskarina* employees from a total workforce of 38 not to participate fully in this project<sup>1</sup>. While some of the interviews were conducted in *Laskarina*’s offices and properties, others took place in cafes and tavernas. The duration of the interviews varied from 40 to 80 minutes, with a median length of 60 minutes. All

were recorded on to audio tapes and fully transcribed before being subject to analysis. In addition, a substantial number of additional informal interviews and observations made in the same time period, photographs of noteworthy landmarks and buildings, and a range of documentation including internet pages, internal policy reports, marketing brochures, and newspaper reports also contributed to our understanding of the organization.

In analyzing our data we have been influenced by the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000, p. 136) which has led to a recognition that language is a form of social practice that ‘constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people’ (Wodak 2003, p. 187). Focusing on how individuals and groups deployed narrative structures to account for their, and their organization’s, activities, we subjected our transcripts and other data sources to a form of grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967), deriving coded categories in an inductive process of interaction and integration of theory and empirical data. The codes, and the data they labelled, were gradually collapsed and refined into three coherent identity narratives that we here refer to as ‘utilitarian’ (economic-focused), ‘normative’ (morality-focused), and ‘hedonic’ (pleasure-focused). Drafts of these narratives were sent to all *Laskarina* employees, including those who were not formally interviewed, and the comments that we received inform the versions we provide here.

### **Narrative and Identity at *Laskarina Holidays***

Founded in 1975 by Ian and Kate Murdoch, *Laskarina*<sup>2</sup> was a small specialist tour operator that sold approximately 10,000 holidays to the ‘unspoilt Greek islands’ each

year (*Laskarina* brochure). The espoused aim for the organization was to provide ‘a better holiday’ to the ‘real Greece’ (Ian Murdoch) for clients who preferred to be ‘treated as travellers rather than package tourists’ (*Laskarina* brochure). The company had a turnover of approximately £5 million, and had won multiple awards in recognition of the high level of service it provided, with 60% of the holidays it sold each year purchased by repeat customers. 19 employees were based in the UK, in the Derbyshire town of Wirksworth, dealing with reservations, ticketing, finance and marketing. A further 19 personnel were based on the 11 Greek islands serviced by *Laskarina*. Of these, the 15 reps and 3 area managers had responsibility for customer support, while the property manager had varied responsibilities associated with the villas and apartments used by the company. Overall, 21 employees had worked for *Laskarina* for more than 3 years, 11 were male and 27 were female. The 2 founder-owners, (Ian and Kate Murdoch, who styled themselves ‘directors’), divided their time between the UK and the Greek islands, and were involved in all operational and strategic aspects of the business.

### **Utilitarian Identity Narrative**

*Laskarina* was a private company that had been initiated by the directors in order to financially support themselves and their preferred lifestyle:

‘... we didn’t have any money. So, we realised that there was no way I could support myself unless we had paying customers’ (Kate Murdoch).

While the founding of *Laskarina* was about ‘making a good living’ (Kate Murdoch), the directors said that they had given considerable thought to their company’s underlying ‘concept’, and how it was to be differentiated in an already crowded market:

‘... our philosophy from the outset was that we wanted people to have a better holiday, a real proper holiday ... a Greek experience’ (Ian Murdoch).

The idea that *Laskarina* was a business, in a ‘dynamic industry’ (Marketing Manager), and that profitability was an important goal, was a constant refrain:

‘I mean obviously Ian and Kate are in business, they have to make a profit, everybody does in their own business’ (PA to the Directors).

The holidays they sold were described as a ‘product’ that had to be delivered efficiently and effectively in order to satisfy customers and thus ensure the continuance of the company:

‘... it’s a business and, you know, decisions have to be made in order to deliver this product’ (Marketing Manager).

In the organization’s economic identity narrative the ‘Laska Greener’ policy featured as an extension of the company’s marketing activities. Staff recognised that the responsible tourism programme was ‘more a concept than a financial reality’, that the economic resource devoted to it was ‘peanuts really’ (Finance Director), and that ‘we are not a charity, we do what we can, but at the end of the day we are a business as well so it has to be rational’ (Reservations Manager):

‘... I suppose from a commercial point of view greenness is also a business ploy, there’s that side of it, it’s a selling point the fact that we are green. So you ... it’s a juggling act and okay it’s altruistic up to a point, but you know, it would be unrealistic to think that nobody thinks, “oh this is good for us as well”’ (Reservations Manager).

Contributing to *Laskarina*’s identity as an economic entity, staff focused on a variety of issues linked to notions of profit, loss, costs, efficiencies, markets and competitors. They spoke about how the organization had become profitable by expanding into Skiathos, the complexities involved in deciding how much money a relatively small business could afford to invest in advertising, and the importance of cutting costs while still retaining control over their rental accommodation. Crucially, they described *Laskarina* as a commercial venture, which needed to satisfy their clients’ demands at a profit, though also one with a unique heritage:

‘... because we are only paying the owner [of a property] there are no agents’ fees coming in the middle, there are no sort of hidden mark ups and the prices we pay are sensibly less ... we get more for the same amount of money is the simple answer. We are buying better, we’ve got better control over the properties that we are renting. So from the beginning to the end the money comes back to the client as a better holiday, or better accommodation for the same money, and that ensures our continuity’ (Ian Murdoch).

### **Normative Identity Narrative**

*Laskarina*, it was said, was initiated not just out of economic necessity, but also ‘out of a passion for Greece’ (Reservations Manager). Employees were adamant that the company conducted its business activities honestly, ethically, and with respect for all its stakeholders including staff, clients, the resident islanders, and the environment. As a reservations consultant insisted: ‘... we are ... friendly to the economy, we are green ... where we have our holidays ... we try and encourage that area to benefit from it’. The idea that, individually and collectively, staff had responsibilities to those with whom they dealt, was said to be personally important by many of our interviewees. Kate Murdoch asserted that ‘I am a great believer in right and wrong’, one rep remarked that she would not work for an organization that was ‘idealistically dodgy’ (Rep 10), another claimed that ‘everyone’s got a responsibility’ (Rep 6), and an area manager stated that ‘if I did move on from *Laskarina* it would have to be to a small company with the same ethos’ (Area Manager 3). A number of employees maintained that ethical concerns often overrode concerns for profitability:

‘... there’s a *Laskarina* way that’s...to consistently deliver holidays that exceed people’s expectations’ (Marketing Manager).

This morality was described as manifesting itself in all aspects of the organization ‘starting with the brochure’ (Rep 5) which ‘doesn’t lie, it tells you the good and the bad’ (Rep 1). Staff said that such concerns were also one reason why the company tended to employ people on the islands who were more mature and better educated

than other tour operators. All reps and area managers were issued with a 71 page document known as a 'Reps Bible' which emphasised not just their work responsibilities but the requirement for them to appear scrupulously fair and honest. For example: '... it is vital that during the season you are seen to be impartial towards shops, bars and tavernas so that no-one feels you have a favourite' (Reps Bible, p. 8). Moreover, unlike the reps employed by some tour operators, those working for *Laskarina* were not permitted to accept 'commissions' from bar, restaurant or boat owners. As one person said: '... it's a sackable offence' (Rep 14).

The company's responsibility to its clients to ensure that their holidays were 'as good as [they] can be for the money that people are paying' (Kate Murdoch) was frequently emphasised, and many staff knew of instances where what they deemed to be exceptional efforts had been made to rectify problems or compensate customers for poor service:

'Two years ago, when we had very bad weather for the departure from Halki and we ... we didn't get all the people off the island and Ian had to charter a plane ... he got that plane in here at midnight one night and we got 85 people on board ... cost him quite a few million. And we didn't get it all back from the insurance company ... That's very responsible tourism' (Area Manager 1).

Perhaps most important to the normative identity narrative was the programme of responsible tourism 'Laska Greener', which most employees agreed constituted 'genuine moves by the company to give something back to the islands and work harmoniously with the islands' (Marketing Manager). There was an overwhelming consensus among staff that the primary motivation for this work was altruism, and most expressed pride in being associated with a company that, for example, combated the use of plastic bags on the islands by providing their clients with canvas 'survival bags', restored original houses and pathways, sent vets to the islands to neuter the

feral cat population and care for local animals, and invested in programmes of flower planting and beach cleaning. Other major projects that employees talked about, often passionately, included the restoration of the churchyard in Halki, the purchase of a fire engine for the island of Samos, and the funding of a music school on the island of Symi:

‘I do believe that Kate and Ian genuinely care about the environment, or contributing to the community ...’ (Rep 4).

‘... the primary reason [for ‘Laska Greener’] is to put something back into Greece’ (Area Manager 1).

### **Hedonic Narrative Identity**

*Laskarina* was said to have had its origins in pleasure, and in particular the founders’ honeymoon to Greece in 1971, and a subsequent vacation to Spetses, which Ian Murdoch described as ‘a holiday of a lifetime’. Most staff knew this story, and connected the birth of the company with the Murdochs’ ‘love’ for Greece:

‘They [Ian and Kate] do have a love for Greece ... there’s a genuine love there ...’ (Rep 4).

Further, many staff said that the organization was centrally concerned with providing pleasurable experiences for their clients:

‘[We’ve] given an awful lot of pleasure and really that’s something to be quite proud of I think’ (Kate Murdoch).

Employees also frequently commented at length on the pleasure that they personally derived from working for *Laskarina*. Most staff made comments such as ‘there’s a lot of mutual respect’ (Rep 8) in this company and ‘the people in the organization are pretty amazing’ (Marketing Manager). While the day-to-day working lives of many personnel mostly involved low-level operational duties, they nevertheless expressed delight in working for the business, arguing that ‘everything is of the highest quality

and honesty' (Rep 5). Part of the reason for the enthusiasm of the UK-based staff was that they were regularly sent on trips (officially termed 'educationals' and referred to by employees as 'perks') to the Greek islands in order to familiarise themselves with the properties in the *Laskarina* brochure. All the reservations staff had visited every *Laskarina* property, and had amassed a wealth of information about each one ranging from how much light it received at different parts of the day to whether the shower unit was attached to a hook or was hand-held. This knowledge was itself a considerable source of pride for staff who took great satisfaction in being able to discuss in detail the holidays they sold to their clients:

'It's an excellent working environment... (PA to the Directors).

'I think all the people who work here really do love it here' (Administration Assistant 1).

Similar comments were made by those working on the Greek islands, though the pleasure they derived from working for *Laskarina* was often bound-up with their happiness in being able to work in Greece:

'... we are all passionate about the company ... I don't think I would work in tourism for anybody else. I think it would be very difficult, when you've worked for the best how do you work for ... simple answer isn't it? Simple answer. I don't think I could' (Rep 9).

One important aspect of this hedonic identity narrative, people insisted, was the humour they associated with working for *Laskarina*. Many employees said that they sought to infuse their work with fun, arguing that 'there's a humorous side to everything' (Rep 1) and that people were constantly looking to 'have a laugh' and 'jolly things up' (PA to the Directors). Much of the humour took the form of stories centred on the antics of their clients:

'... the client who lost his false teeth and wouldn't come out the villa' (Rep 1).



‘... a client once turned up for Symi [a small rocky island] with his golf clubs’ (Area Manager 1).

‘[The clients who eat the mosquito machine tablets] ... they think they are after dinner mints’ (Rep 10).

### **Dissonant Voices**

Of course, the narratives that we have retrospectively constructed from our interviews reflect majority views, and some ‘dissonant voices’ have not been heard. For instance, while the overwhelming majority of staff expressed great satisfaction in working for *Laskarina*, even Kate Murdoch spoke of her ‘moments of deep despair’. A few staff voiced complaints about how the organization was managed, suggesting that ‘the communication here’s a bit crappy’ (Administrative Assistant 2), that the directors found ‘it particularly difficult to delegate’ (Rep 11), and even that ‘it’s a dictatorship’ (Rep 6). Some staff also made negative comments about the clients, though there were no obvious trends here, with some arguing that they were people who were fixated on ‘class’ and talking ‘right’ (Administrative Assistant 1) while others said that *Laskarina* was increasingly ‘getting sort of lower class clients’ who ‘don’t know so much about Greece and don’t have realistic expectations’ (Rep 11). In addition, many people complained about working long hours, the intense nature of the work, and the lack of privacy:

‘It [lack of privacy] is a bit of a downside because you can never escape... you need a high tolerance factor in this job’ (Rep 1).

‘I think in reservations they work extremely hard’ (Marketing Manager).

Other employees questioned the normative narrative identity authored by their colleagues, claiming that *Laskarina*’s concern with social, environmental and developmental issues was ‘a bit superficial’ (Rep 10), and that ‘the green issues are too few and far between, I think the company sort of hams it up a bit actually’ (Rep

6). Kate Murdoch herself recognised that it was ‘very selfish to invade somebody else’s country and inflict your tourists on them’, and that rather than being programmatic ‘Laska Greener’ arose ‘more or less [from] what we stumble across because it’s totally personal’. The argument was also made that while staff at *Laskarina* may have been altruistically motivated, because of the nature of the industry the company was in, its overall impact was inevitably negative:

‘... what effect other than negative can a travel company have on the environment?’ (Finance Manager).

‘*Laskarina* won’t accept anywhere now, new properties, without air conditioning. Now that’s not environmentally friendly is it?’ (Rep 11).

## **Discussion**

In this paper we have analyzed three prominent identity stories at *Laskarina Holidays*, shown how they were interwoven in what was a complex storytelling milieu, and identified a number of idiosyncratic versions of the organization that countered mainstream views. In-so-doing, our study has illustrated that in contributing to collective identity narratives individuals were also telling narratives of the self, thus symptomising the mutuality of processes of individual and organizational identity authorship. Further, the narratives, we have argued, may be understood as exercises in power designed to reify a specific social order, set of hierarchical relations, and mode of working. These points require further amplification and analysis.

If ‘the concept of organizational identity refers to how organizational members perceive and understand “who we are/or what we stand for”’ (Hatch and Schultz 2002, p. 15), then one way in which these issues are addressed is through the formulation of shared narratives. Organizational identity stories are dynamic

constructs, invented and reinvented in continuing dialogues between participants, including those between employees and external stakeholders such as customers and suppliers. These narratives are important means of stimulating reflexive conversations that promote shared understandings from which processes of organization emerge. As in our case, such narratives often incorporate a claim to uniqueness not only because ‘distinctiveness’ tends to be associated with perceptions of competitive advantage, but also because many people share a collective narcissistic desire to be different (Brown, 1997). Of course, not all stories are equally compelling, and many narratives of an organization’s identity will prove transient, or be ascribed peripheral status by participants. As Barry and Elmes (1997, p. 434) have argued, ‘effective’ stories must balance the sometimes competing demands that their audience has for plots that they are able to construe as both ‘credible’ and appealingly ‘novel’. For researchers such narratives are potentially interesting phenomena that reveal organizations as polyphonic linguistic constructs, the study of which may further our understanding of the interpolative dynamics of hegemony and resistance.

The privileged position of senior managers, and in particular founder-owners, means that they are often powerful contributors to an organization’s identity stories, which they may seek to mould for their own purposes. At *Laskarina*, it was noticeable that Ian and Kate Murdoch were important shapers of the dominant identity narratives. Their efforts to influence the stories that their staff told about the company constituted a far from systematic, but nevertheless pervasive and consistent, attempt to promote versions of the organization that emphasized its utilitarian, normative and hedonic aspects. It was *their* understandings, namely that the organization should make a profit, while respecting putative sets of obligations to others, by selling pleasurable

experiences, that staff had co-opted into their on-going narrativizations of their work. The success of the founders' authorial strategy was, arguably, assisted by several significant factors. For example, the small number of employees, flat hierarchy, and their active day-to-day involvement in all aspects of the company, including processes of recruitment and selection, meant that they could frequently communicate directly with all members of staff. Perhaps just as importantly, from *Laskarina's* inception they had had a clear idea or 'vision' of what they were seeking to achieve with their business, and consequently their identity stories seemed to have been little altered since 1975. The result was that there were relatively few contradictory or 'off-message' storylines that contested their views. The pervasive influence of the founders ensured that as change occurred – such as staff turnover and the adoption of new islands as holiday destinations – they were co-opted into existing narratives of the organization's identity. Subtle changes were thus accompanied by considerable stability.

The identity narratives authored by the Murdochs were, thus, a means of communicating and instantiating sets of power relations, and a *modus operandi*, that success in the form of year-on-year profitability and multiple industry awards had legitimated. These identity narratives were hegemonic, and had not only reified a particular power structure and social order, but inculcated in employees a set of assumptions and associated work practices that served the ends prescribed by the founders. Our case illustrates that 'Narratives provide members with accounts of the process of organizing' (Mumby 1987, p. 113) and that these narrative accounts are artfully constructed by those in positions of authority. We have also shown that employees' sensemaking occurs in a political context and is subject to the hegemonic

influence of carefully edited stories spun by those with panoptic, universalizing and totalizing intent. As Salzer-Morling (1998, p. 116) has asserted, 'In the fabrication of meanings lies a desire to offset heterogenization in meanings with homogenization, and thereby control and integrate people in organizations'. It is a point of particular interest that this seemed to have been more fully achieved in *Laskarina* than in many organizations.

Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of our case was that employees seemed often to conflate their self-narratives with the (especially normative and hedonic) narratives with which they constituted *Laskarina*. The idea that our individual identities are made subjectively available to us through our narrativizations of experience which communicate a sense of biographical uniqueness, is now well established. As Bruner (1994, p. 53) has stated, 'We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell. The self is a story which is forever being rewritten'. By employing staff who were predisposed to embrace the founders' collective identity narratives, and then continuously subjecting them to such accounts, employees were made the subject of invasive and insidious 'techniques of surveillance and power/knowledge strategies' (Knights and Willmott 1989, p. 554). This meant that in giving meaning to their experiences by 'storying' their working lives staff coped with long hours, monotonous routine interactions with clients, and low pay, by linking their personal identity narratives with those of the organization. While many employees said that this was supportive of their self-esteem, and promoted feelings of self-efficacy and wellness, it also evidently served the interests of the founders who so often featured as protagonists in the identity stories that others told.

This said, there was some evidence for resistance. There were staff members who argued that ‘Laska Greener’ was a rhetorical device designed to maximise revenues, and a few employees did not connect *Laskarina* with pleasure. These dissonant voices, which variously ignored and contested the dominant narratives, are suggestive of the often considerable ‘interpretive flexibility’ that people have to author their own world views, and the limits on the capacities of elites to impose on the understandings of their staff. Our argument is that ‘The world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation’ (Fisher 1987, p. 65), and these choices are rarely wholly constrained, not least because organizations are the intersection of multiple and diverse discursive resources that can be drawn on by participants, and which promote plurivocity. Thus, although organizations exert pervasive controls over participants, and may sometimes be able to colonize them from the inside to create ‘engineered’ (Kunda 1992) or ‘designer’ (Casey 1995) selves, such ‘totalitarianism’ (Schwartz 1990) rarely goes unquestioned, and is never complete. In short, senior managers’ control over discursive space cannot be total, and this is one reason why organizations are best theorised as polyphonic rather than monological locales of power.

In sum, the theoretical position that we have outlined suggests that the identities of organizations are constituted by the narratives that participants tell about them. In this paper we have focused on three ‘grand’ narratives that were widely shared, and which seem relatively coherent, ‘finished’ and self-contained. These are all problematic aspects of our efforts to adequately illustrate our narratological conception of organizational identity. Our decision to privilege just three ‘major’ storylines has

meant that many others have had to be suppressed. There were, for example, strong storylines centred on the supposed ‘uniqueness’ of the organization, its ‘family’ atmosphere, and its ‘professionalism’. These themes feature here only as narrative fragments in the quotations we have used to construct our version of the company. Further, by analysing broadly shared narratives we have not been able to include some partisan stories told by particular groups and individuals, even though for some people these may have been significant identity constructions. Perhaps most importantly, our telling does not capture the complexity of a social situation in which stories and story ‘parts’ were mostly told to us and to other organizational participants in ‘bits and pieces’, or that this storytelling was emergent and ongoing. Our representations are crystallizations and also, inevitably, distortions of diverse narrative minerals, and should be thought of as merely ‘indicative’ or ‘symptomatic’ of complicated processes of narrative construction and change. Storytelling organizations are, after all, heterogeneous polyphonies of ‘simultaneously and sequentially occurring vocalities’ (Currie and Brown 2003, p. 564).

## **Conclusion**

Embedded in the linguistic ‘turn’ in the social sciences, this paper has sought to contribute to our understanding and theorization of organizational identities as narrative constructs. In particular, we have shown how dominant identity narratives are authored and promulgated by those who are hierarchically privileged, and how these narratives act as frames that structure communities’ ‘knowledge’ about themselves. Such narratives are not ‘ideologically neutral’ but legitimate ‘a centred point of view’ (Boje 2001, p. 18), and organizations are appropriately regarded as ‘regime[s] of truth’ (Brown 1991, p. 192-3) that subjugate and marginalise other

discourses. While ‘ordinary’ individuals may contest the hegemony of their senior managers’ narrative impositions, and we should always be sensitive to the ‘microstoria’ of junior employees, as we have illustrated, their individual self-narratives will, nevertheless, often borrow some threads from the narrative fabric woven by their superiors. Yet, despite appearances of fixity and permanence, processes of hegemonic imposition and resistance are dynamic, and multiple versions of ‘reality’ tend always to exist in tension. This means not only that identity narratives are being constantly re-authored, embellished, and fragmented as they are told and re-told at different times by different people in different settings, but that these stories are themselves being continuously re-interpreted and re-imagined by actors whose views and circumstances are always in flux. Identity narratives, and the power structures they instantiate, are always in a permanent state of becoming.

Finally, our approach supports the claim that the main advantage of the ‘discovery’ of narrative has been ‘the possibility of opening up new spaces for investigating relations between subjects and structures’ (Andrews et. al. 2000, p. 9), especially those relations centred on multiple identities, the management of which Cheney (1991) maintains is *the* issue for modern organizations. ‘Narrative emplotment’, as we, together with many theorists across the social sciences have argued, yields ‘a form of understanding of human experience, both individual and collective, that is not directly amenable to other forms of exposition or analysis’ (Kerby, 1991, p. 3). What is more, ‘organizational change occurs with alterations in the stories that people tell’ (Brown and Humphreys, 2004, p. 139). Considerable further work investigating how different kinds and genres of narratives are associated with various identity types, forms of identification, and processes of change is still to be undertaken in our efforts to



explore ‘the themes, patterns and meanings ascribed to different organizational narratives, texts and discourses’ (Marshak et. al. 2000, p. 257).

## **Epilogue**

In January 2004 Ian and Kate Murdoch officially announced to all staff that the Wirksworth office would close during the current season and that operations would be re-located to a site near Gatwick airport. The staff who were “in shock” (Reservations staff member) were given the option to relocate or to take a redundancy payment which was “slightly better than the statutory minimum” (PA to Ian Murdoch). They were informed that the relocation and redundancy programme would be a phased operation between March 2004 and July 2004 and that those opting for the latter would be informed of their individual termination date in due course. In the event, no member of the Wirksworth staff relocated and all except Ian’s PA were made redundant by the end of August 2004. The office equipment, furniture, reservations charts and client files were moved in June, and by July all booking telephone enquiries were being rerouted to the Gatwick site. Employees who had expressed feelings that working for Laskarina had been “so close knit... just like a little family” (Wirksworth Employee) now felt “quite angry” and a sense of “betrayal”.

During our research we telephoned the Wirksworth office over a hundred times and we were always answered immediately by a member of the reservations team who would put our call through to the relevant person. The first telephone call that we made to the Gatwick office was answered by a machine giving us a range of options

and buttons to press. After being kept on hold listening to classical music for 10 minutes we terminated the call.

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<sup>1</sup> These three employees were, however, engaged in informal conversation.

<sup>2</sup> The company had been named after *Laskarina Bouboulina*, the heroine of Spetses instrumental in the uprising against the Turks in the Greek war of Independence of 1821.